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Sheila Murnaghan

University of Pennsylvania, smurnagh@sas.upenn.edu

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Choroi achoroi

The Athenian politics of tragic choral identity

Sheila Murnaghan

The quest for tragedy's fifth-century Athenian identity naturally leads to the chorus. Despite the presence of individual actors, tragedy was still a form of choral performance, both in institutional terms, as recent work on the financing of choruses has underscored,¹ and in terms of popular understanding. As Peter Wilson puts it, 'Stopped on his way to the tragic competitions of the City Dionysia and asked where he was headed, the average classical Athenian in the street would very probably have replied "*es chorou*" ("to the choruses") . . .'.² The chorus is key to what the community that produced and witnessed tragedy saw itself as doing: honouring Dionysus with collective singing and dancing. Within the plays themselves, the chorus's collective voice is an apt medium for expressing the values and perspectives of that community. For critics seeking to highlight tragedy's engagement with communal concerns rather than its portrayal of unique or transcendent individual experience, the chorus is an obvious place to turn.

The role of the tragic chorus as a reflection of the Athenian community is complicated, however, by the innovation that defined Athenian drama and set it apart from other choral performances: the use of *mimēsis*, which extends to choruses as well as to actors. Choruses are less fully in character than the actors, so that Aristotle saw the chorus's participation in the myth as something that had to be insisted on: 'the chorus must be understood as one of the actors and must be part of the whole and share in the action' (*συναγωνίζεσθαι*) (Arist. *Poet.* 1456^a25–7). But even as they remain a group of singers and dancers, chorus members take on a role in the myth that, in most

This chapter has benefited from the comments of audiences at Reading, and at the University of Leiden and the University of Pennsylvania.

¹ Wilson (2000).

² Wilson (2005), 183.

cases, differs markedly from their underlying identity as Athenian citizens. Although they are often on the margins of the action, choruses are closely involved with the main characters: They are 'both the prisoners and the passionately engaged witnesses to tragic experience',³ and this tempers the degree to which they offer the detached perspective expected of narrators (the role of non-dramatic choruses) and spectators.

Furthermore, tragic plots place choruses in circumstances in which choral activity is out of place. Tragic choruses repeatedly confront the impossibility of singing and dancing in the dire situations in which they find themselves. Even as they themselves sing and dance, they testify to conditions in which no one would want to do so. This paradox, which the title of this chapter aims to capture,⁴ helps to define the character of tragedy, with its focus on discord and the breakdown of civilized norms and institutions. In those tragedies that also depict the resolution of conflict and the restoration of order, the return of choruses to circumstances favourable to choral performance contributes to that happier outcome; as the following discussion will show, Athens and Athenian institutions are instrumental in the restoration of conditions in which choruses can be themselves.

1. THE DOUBLE BIND OF TRAGIC CHORAL IDENTITY

Accounts of the tragic chorus as a reflection of the fifth-century Athenian community necessarily play down its dramatic identity. In an essay that helped to shape recent historicist approaches to tragedy, Jean-Pierre Vernant identifies the chorus as one of 'two elements that occupy the tragic stage'.

One is the chorus, the collective and anonymous presence embodied by an official college of citizens. Its role is to express through its fears, hopes, questions and judgements, the feelings of the spectators who make up the civic community. The other, played by a professional actor, is the individualised character whose actions form the core of the drama and who appears as a hero from an age gone by, always more or less estranged from the ordinary condition of the citizen.⁵

Vernant's definition elides the fifth-century identity that lay beneath the masks and costumes of tragic chorus members—the 'official college of citizens'—with

³ Gould (1996), 221.

⁴ In tragedy, the adjective *achoros* expresses the incompatibility with choruses of Ares (Aesch. *Supp.* 681), of death (Soph. *OC* 1222), and of mothers' groans for their fallen sons (Eur. *Andr.* 1037).

⁵ Vernant (1988b), 33–4.

their dramatic role, glossing over the way that choruses enter into the same mythical world as the characters.⁶ In addition, although the chorus members themselves were invariably citizens, their dramatic roles usually depart from the profile of a citizen as free, male, native, and, in ideal form, in the prime of life: choruses most often depict figures who are socially marginalized, like female slaves, or disqualified from full participation in active life, like the old. This feature of the tragic chorus is often noted, but has been difficult to interpret, since choruses do not simply voice the perspective of outsiders: whatever their fictional identities, they often articulate broadly shared communal traditions and values.⁷ While some scholars have speculated about the psychological effect on the chorus members themselves of 'playing the other',⁸ the broader impact of the chorus's feigned marginality, to which this discussion will return, has been hard to assess.

The dramatic roles of tragic choruses also obscure their underlying religious identity as participants in a festival honouring Dionysus. As actors in a fictional plot, tragic choruses differ from typical ritual choruses, which often tell myths but do not pretend to be characters in those myths.⁹ Scholarship on the ritual dimension of the tragic chorus, in particular a series of important articles by Albert Henrichs, has laid particular stress on moments of 'self-referentiality' when the chorus's mask seems to slip. According to Henrichs, at those moments the chorus performs a ritual function even as it is play-acting; episodes of choral self-referentiality bring tragic performances closer to the audience's familiar experiences of ritual choral singing and dancing to give the audience a more 'integrated experience . . . in which the choral performance in the orchestra merges with the more imaginary performance[s] . . . that take place in the action of each play'.¹⁰

⁶ Similarly, Longo's (1990: 17) characterization of the chorus as 'the staged metaphor for the community involved in the dramatic performance' gives insufficient weight to the difference that metaphors entail.

⁷ See the subtle dialogue on these issues offered by Gould (1996) and Goldhill (1996). Gould emphasizes the chorus's marginal dramatic roles and its consequent capacity to speak for 'the excluded, the oppressed and the vulnerable' (224), but also notes that the chorus provides 'the ballast of memory' (225). Goldhill develops Gould's observations, pointing out that the chorus's expressions of exclusion often invoke collective values as they sing of 'an imagined world of (lost) civic harmony, integration, and fulfilment' (252). For a thorough discussion of the fictional roles of tragic choruses, including the observation that 'all choruses gravitate to traditional wisdom' (20–1), see Foley (2003).

⁸ See Winkler (1985); Zeitlin (1985) (both repr. in Winkler and Zeitlin (1990)).

⁹ Ritual choruses may have a significant relationship to the protagonists of myth, but as descendants of those protagonists, or subsequent members of the same community, who may be performing in order to compensate for the protagonists' sufferings and transgressions, rather than as interested bystanders to those events. See Kowalzig (2004), 50–5.

¹⁰ Henrichs (1996), 49. See also Henrichs (1995).

Henrich's language of 'integration', 'merging', and 'expansion' minimizes, but does not efface, the distinction between the tragic chorus's two identities: its fictional identity as a character within the tragic plot and its real underlying identity as a chorus. This underlying identity is expressed implicitly through the chorus's singing and dancing and explicitly through references to its choral function of a kind familiar from non-dramatic choral lyric. These two identities can be hard to distinguish, since choruses tend to move fluidly back and forth between them, and it is worth noting that both lend themselves to self-referentiality. Sometimes a chorus steps out of its fictional character to call attention to its own singing and dancing, but sometimes its fictional character is that of a group of people who participate in, or could participate in, choral performance. Those two identities are nonetheless distinct, and furthermore in conflict with each other, because choral activity is out of place in tragic myths.

Tragedy is informed by a traditional model of choral song and dance as inherently festive, as a collective celebration of the benefits enjoyed by both the performers and their audiences. Throughout Greek culture, choral performance is seen as an emblem and agent of harmony and stability, an expression of human society at its best that mimics the blessed state of the gods and the order of the *cosmos*. In a number of texts, including Sophocles' *Antigone* (1146–7) and Plato's *Timaeus* (40c), the movement of the stars is compared to the dancing of a chorus. In Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (8.3, 20), the chorus provides an analogy for a properly functioning household. For Polybius (4.20–1), musical culture including choruses offers protection against *stasis* and makes the difference between a civilized and a savage community. In Aristophanes' *Frogs* (1419), Dionysus equates the city's ability to present choruses with its salvation. The actual role of choral dancing as a medium of social cohesion in archaic and classical Greece has been described in a number of recent studies.¹¹ Among ancient sources, Plato's *Laws* stands out for its thoroughgoing endorsement of the importance of choral participation to successful civic life: the Athenian lawgiver ends up prescribing choral activity for all members of the community, male and female, young and old.

The chorus is repeatedly invoked as a fitting metaphor—or, perhaps better, synecdoche—for political life in general, but it is not automatically associated with a particular type of constitution. The excellence of the chorus, which represents a community at its best, can give it an aristocratic or oligarchic valence, the equal participation of its members a democratic one.

¹¹ Bacon (1995); Calame (2001); Kowalzig (2007); Lonsdale (1993); Wilson (2003a).

The democratic flavour of the chorus is illustrated by Aristotle's reference to the chorus in the *Politics* to explain why democratic constitutions include ostracism: 'a trainer of choruses will not allow a man who sings louder and more beautifully than the whole chorus to join in the chorus' (οὐδὲ δὴ χοροδιδάσκαλος τὸν μείζον καὶ κάλλιον τοῦ παντὸς χοροῦ φθεγγόμενον ἐάσει συγχορεύειν, Arist. *Pol.* 1284^b11–13).

In fifth-century Athens, the democracy gave a particular shape to choral activity, as Peter Wilson stresses in his chapter in this volume. Choral activity in democratic Athens was both more focused and more inclusive than in other cities: more focused because it was tied almost exclusively to the worship of Dionysus, and more inclusive because the Dionysian festivals were organized in such a way as to extend choral participation to a very large number of citizen men.¹² Particularly notable in this respect were the annual dithyrambic competitions involving ten choruses of fifty men and ten of fifty boys, organized by the ten Cleisthenic tribes. At the same time, choral activity by women, like other forms of public female participation, was less common than in other cities.¹³

The institution of the *chorēgia*, in which a wealthy citizen funded the activity of the chorus as a liturgy, could be characterized by the Old Oligarch as a typical democratic soak-the-rich handout to the *dēmos* ([Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 1.13), and it made the chorus less hierarchical by diverting its most prominent member to another role.¹⁴ But the chorus in general, with its deep historical roots and its presence throughout the Greek world, could not be claimed as a specifically democratic phenomenon. Its traditional associations were aristocratic,¹⁵ and in its cohesiveness, the chorus could stand for the transcendence of ideological difference. In Xenophon's account of the aftermath of the battle of Munychia, the herald Cleocritus makes an appeal for unity to the supporters of the Thirty on behalf of the exiled democrats by invoking their shared experience in choruses (Xen. *Hell.* 2.4.20). The exploration of choral activity in mythological settings (usually monarchical and non-Athenian) is one way in which tragedy is political without being partisan, concerning itself with the *polis* without necessarily, or always, identifying the *polis* as democratic.¹⁶

In typical scenarios of non-dramatic choral performance, the pleasure of the occasion is not compromised by the telling of painful stories. In the divine scene that forms the pattern for choral performance among humans, the

¹² Kowalzig (2004).

¹³ On the relative lack of female choral activity in Athens, see Parker (2005), 182–3; Stehle (1997), 59–60.

¹⁴ Kurke (2007), 100.

¹⁵ Kowalzig (2004), 55; Kurke (2007).

¹⁶ In this respect, the chorus supports the view of Rhodes (2003).

singing and dancing of the Muses on Olympus, the assembled gods delight in songs whose subjects are, from a mortal perspective, grim: the Muses sing, on the one hand, 'of the gods' unending gifts' and, on the other hand, of 'the sufferings / that humans receive from the immortal gods / as they live out their lives, foolish and helpless, and cannot / find a cure for death or a shield against old age' (*Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 190–3). Choral performers and their audiences occupy a different time from the events they contemplate, and in their festive state, they share the timelessness of the gods: as the speaker of the *Hymn to Apollo* says of the Ionian festival on Delos, the human version of the Muses' festival on Olympus, someone who saw the participants gathered together would say they were 'deathless and unaging' (151). In this setting, they stand apart from time itself, the medium in which the narratives they tell inevitably unfold.

But tragic choruses, being incorporated into particular plots with time-bound stories of suffering and disruption, find themselves in situations in which celebration is unthinkable; this complicates their self-representation as singers and shapes the character of tragic song. The antipathy between choral performance and participation in the tragic plot emerges in many of the examples of choral self-referentiality discussed by Henrichs. Among the times when tragic choruses are most overtly choruses are those at which they misunderstand the circumstances in which they find themselves, as in the famous 'falsely euphoric' choruses of Sophocles. The chorus of the *Ajax* is *περιχαρής* ('filled with joy') and announces *νῦν γὰρ ἐμοὶ μέλει χορεῦσαι* ('now I feel like dancing') when it mistakenly believes that the central *pathos* of the play, Ajax's suicide, is not going to happen (Soph. *Aj.* 693, 701). The chorus of the *Trachiniae* declares itself lifted up and whirled round in Bacchic rivalry when it misrecognizes the return of Heracles as the prelude to a happy ending with the renewed marriage of Heracles and Deianeira (Soph. *Trach.* 205–24).

One of Henrichs's most important observations is how closely bound choral self-referentiality is to what he calls 'choral projection', the chorus's reference to themselves as choral performers, but in contexts other than the actual here and now of the dramatic action. An example that combines this sort of projection with misunderstanding of the plot is the reaction of the chorus in *Oedipus Tyrannus* to the news that Oedipus was a foundling rescued on Mt Cithaeron: they promise to honour the mountain by dancing there the following night (Soph. *OT* 1086–97). Falsely imagining a scenario in which Oedipus is the offspring of a happy union of god and mortal, they look forward to a celebration that will occur off stage and outside the narrow chronological frame of the tragic plot, and that is impossible under the true conditions of Oedipus' story. It is difficult for a tragic chorus to be fully and knowledgeably involved in its fictional role and to represent itself convincingly

as a festive chorus; too often its 'choral aspirations are . . . deflated by the tragic action'.¹⁷ The involvement of choruses with tragic characters compromises their choral identity and skews the character of their singing.

While tragedy notably brings together and recombines a full range of poetic genres, it also has a particularly strong association with lament. Lamentation may be a necessary and consoling response to human suffering, but it stands in sharp contrast to festive choral song. Lament is widely recognized in tragedy as itself paradoxical: a form of music that lacks the attributes of music, what Charles Segal calls in a study of this phenomenon 'negated music'.¹⁸ In the *Choephoroi*, lament is characterized as *paramousos*, 'unmusical' (Aesch. *Cho.* 467), in the *Trojan Women* as *achoreutos*, 'undanced' (Eur. *Tro.* 121). Furthermore, lament lacks a key element of festive choral performance, the notion that the performers represent the community at its best. Plato's view of lament as a debased activity that compromises those who participate in it may be extreme, but on no account do mourners present a community in a state of flourishing, which is the proper condition under which to honour the gods with singing and dancing.

This displacement of the chorus from its proper role—its exile from festivity—is a measure of the extreme disorder portrayed in tragedy, and moments of choral self-referentiality often serve to drive this home. This is the function of the famous example from which Henrichs derives the title of one of his articles, 'Why Should I Dance?' In the second stasimon of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the chorus responds to Jocasta's attempt to calm Oedipus by pointing out that the oracles predicting that Laius would be killed by his own child never came true. They express anxiety about an outcome that seems to undermine traditional religious observances, such as consulting the oracle, and performing in choruses. If the oracles are not shown to be true, and if crimes like the murder of Laius go unpunished, they ask: τί δέῃ με χορεύειν ('why should I dance?', Soph. *OT* 896). The cruel brilliance of the play is such that the supposed preconditions of their dancing—fulfilment of the oracles, punishment of the murderer—will be met, but in a way that will not inspire them to dance. Instead, they wish they had never met Oedipus and cannot bear to look at him (1216–18, 1303–6).

In other tragedies, especially those of Euripides, distance from choral experience is not an internal psychological response of the chorus, but a mark of wretched external circumstances involving captivity, exile, and social exclusion. In her chapter in this volume, Eirene Visvardi shows how, in both the *Hecuba* and the *Trojan Women*, choruses of captive women articulate their

¹⁷ Henrichs (1995), 73.

¹⁸ Segal (1993).

misfortune by voicing unrealistic longings for future participation in choral performances in various Greek settings. Such displacements are experienced by the main characters as well, and can involve nostalgia as well as future hopes: so Hecuba in the *Trojan Women* explicitly contrasts her current condition as the singer of a bitter lament with her flourishing life at Troy, where she once led off a very different kind of song (Eur. *Tro.* 146–52).

The disruption of choral identity is a powerful, culturally resonant trope through which tragedy registers the extreme suffering to which humans are subject. As Nicole Loraux (2002) has argued, tragedy is least political and least jingoistic when it testifies to universal conditions of loss and grief, and Visvardi's discussion further details the panhellenic reach of tragic choral lamentation. It is when tragedy offers remedies and depicts resolutions that its Athenian partisanship is most evident. The role of Athens as the setting in which tragic plots reach relatively happy endings, as in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, or Euripides' *Suppliants*, is well known. Athens and Athenian institutions are similarly instrumental in resolutions that involve a restoration of the chorus's festive nature, a healing of the rift between a chorus's identity as a chorus and its involvement in the tragic plot. The rest of this chapter will sketch out some of the ways in which this is the case.

2. CHORAL METAMORPHOSIS IN THE *EUMENIDES*

An obvious starting point is Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, where the chorus is an important character in the action and Athens figures prominently as the necessary setting for the resolution of tragic conflict. The problems of the House of Atreus are only ended after the scene shifts from Argos to Athens and the Athenian institution of the court of the Areopagus is invented. This resolution also requires a change of identity for the chorus. Whatever questions remain open at the end, the final note of the play is one of joyous celebration as the chorus exits the theatre in a festive procession singing songs of blessing designed to bring about the continued flourishing of the city. This is perhaps the best example in tragedy of Henrichs's 'integrated experience' or 'merging' of 'choral performance' and 'imaginary performance'; the distinction between what appears to happen and what actually is happening disappears as a group of performers, now Athenians (although metics rather than citizens), sings and dances (or perhaps marches) in order to celebrate and benefit the city.

This integration of actual performance and fictional event can only happen after the chorus has abandoned the role it adopted for most of the play. They

have to stop impersonating the Erinyes, a counter-chorus that has been pointedly singing and dancing in ways antithetical to festive choral performance: first through their binding-song, intended to consign Orestes to permanent punishment for his matricide, and then through their threat to call down curses on the city when the verdict of the trial goes against them.¹⁹ The chorus's return to a straightforward choral role involves an explicit change of identity, with new costumes, the crimson robes of metics, and possibly a new name. It also requires that they leave behind their investment in the tragic plot: to become the Eumenides they have to give up their hostility to Orestes, who is now Athens' ally, and their allegiance to Clytemnestra; and Orestes, the one remaining representative of that painful story, has to leave the stage. What removes Orestes from the stage is his acquittal by the Areopagus, and what leads the chorus to accept that outcome is their transformation into members of the Athenian community.

3. RETURNING TO THE CHORUS

Tragedies like *Hecuba* and *Trojan Women*, which fix their characters in conditions of permanent exile from the chorus, are complemented by plays with happier outcomes, which involve the restoration of choral participation for chorus and main characters alike. A non-tragic model for the loss and recovery of choral performance as a plot can be found in Euripides' *Cyclops*. The play opens with the leader of the satyr chorus, Silenus, explaining that all his troubles are due to Dionysus, including his current circumstances. While searching for Dionysus, who has been captured by pirates, Silenus and his sons have been driven onto the shores of Etna where they have been captured and enslaved by Polyphemus. 'So now', he adds, 'instead of dancing in the feast of Bacchus, / we herd the flocks of this godless Cyclops' (ἀντὶ δ' εὐίων βακχευμάτων / ποίμνας Κύκλωπος ἀνοσίου ποιμαίνομεν, Eur. *Cyc.* 25–6). When the chorus enters, actually herding sheep, Silenus expresses amazement at what we might recognize as a fundamental constituent of choral drama, the fact that the chorus dances like a chorus even when playing its allotted fictional role. Specifically, he's amazed by the κρότος σικινίδων, the din of the satyr chorus's signature dance, the sikinnis (37).

In their own song, the chorus reiterates this theme of their banishment from festivity in an epode that begins οὐ τάδε Βρόμιος, οὐ τάδε χοροὶ /

¹⁹ On the frankly anti-choral character of the Erinyes, see Prins (1991); Henrichs (1995), 60–5; Wilson and Taplin (1993).

βακχεῖαί τε θυρσοφόροι ('No Bacchus here! Not here the dance, / or the women whirling the *thyrsos*', 63–4). The events of the play liberate the chorus from this uncongenial situation, following a scenario of release from captivity that was evidently a regular plot motif in satyr drama.²⁰ Odysseus shows up to blind the Cyclops and with him the chorus departs what Silenus has characterized as an ἄχορον . . . χθόνα, a 'land without choruses' (124), to be reunited with Dionysus and resume their characteristic, perennial festivity.

A similar plot development occurs in a number of Euripides' late tragedies, those that are often labelled 'romances' and that share some of the satyr play's affinities to comedy.²¹ As in the *Cyclops*, the question of whether the chorus will return to its proper function comes up in relation to situations of literal displacement or exile. In the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the chorus are captive Greek women serving as attendants to Iphigenia. They sing of their repeated prayers for a voyager from Greece who would rescue them and take them home. And they express their longing for home in terms of nostalgia for the chorus: they recall the joys of joining the youthful band, of shining under a mother's gaze, of competing in beauty, and of sheltering beneath veils and curls (Eur. *IT* 1138–52). In this play too the chorus gets its wish. As Iphigenia enlists the chorus as helpers in her escape, she promises them that, once she and Orestes return, they will work for the chorus's release (1067–8). As it turns out, they do not have to wait for that: when Athena appears to clear up the complications of the plot, her instructions include a command to Thoas to send the chorus home (1467–8). This tragic chorus has the same fate as the satyr chorus of the *Cyclops*: they too have been captive in an alien setting and are promised a release that will allow them to reassume a choral identity.

The fate of the *Iphigenia in Tauris*'s chorus helps to clarify the significance of choral marginality. These women are typical of slave choruses in tragedy in that they are not born slaves, but captive aristocrats. Their servile status is significant, not as the source of a distinctive outsider's perspective, but as a plot device for subordinating them to the main characters and as a means of representing loss. Their fall in status allows them to testify to the instability and difficulty of human experience, sometimes in the form of irremediable suffering, sometimes in the form of a temporary misfortune from which they can be rescued.

Euripides' *Helen* rehearses a scenario of exile and homecoming very like that of the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, but in this case it is the protagonist's experience that is cast in terms of absence from and return to the chorus. As Menelaus and

²⁰ Seaford (1984), 33–6.

²¹ On the affinities between the Euripidean 'romances' and satyr drama, see Griffith (2002), 235–7 and the bibliography cited there.

Helen make their escape from Egypt, the chorus sings an ode in which they call on the sea-goddess Galanea to smooth Helen's journey (Eur. *Hel.* 1465–75):

ἡ που κόρας ἄν ποταμοῦ
παρ' οἶδμα Λευκιπίδας ἡ πρὸ ναοῦ
Παλλάδος ἄν λάβοις
χρόνῳ ξυνελθοῦσα χοροῖς
ἡ κώμοις Ὑακίνθου
νύχιον ἐς εὐφροσύναν,
ὄν ἐξαμιλλησάμενος
τροχῷ τέρμονα δίσκου
ἔκανε Φοῖβος, τᾷ Λακαί-
να γὰρ βούθυτον ἀμέραν·
ὁ Διὸς δ' εἶπε σέβειν γόνος.

So, Helen, might you find again
the Daughters of the White Horses there by the river,
or before the temple of Pallas
come back at last to the dances
or the revels for Hyacinthus
and the night-long festival
established by Phoebus after
his whirled throw of the discus
in games; for the Laconian land
a day of sacrifices
by ordinance of him, son of Zeus.

(tr. Lattimore)²²

Helen's return to Sparta is expressed in terms of her reinstatement as a participant, presumably a leading participant, in women's choruses and the festival of the Hyacinthia. Here we might recall Hecuba in *The Trojan Women*, when she measures the misery of her current position by contrasting her song of grief with the dances she once led off as queen of Troy (Eur. *Tro.* 146–52).

Euripides' *Electra* provides an even more pointed illustration of the way exile from the chorus can be a marker of tragic circumstances for main characters, particularly women. There the chorus of Argive women enters the scene speaking of a choral performance that is to take place off stage: they bring Electra the news that it is time to celebrate their annual festival in honour of Hera and invite her to join them. Electra refuses, announcing in effect her self-banishment from choral song (Eur. *El.* 175–89):

²² Lattimore's translation and the following one (by Vermeule) are reprinted from *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, vols 3 and 4, Chicago: Chicago University Press, © 1958, by the University of Chicago.

οὐκ ἐπ' ἀγλαΐαις, φίλαι,
 θυμὸν οὐδ' ἐπὶ χρυσεῖς
 ὄρμοις ἐκπεπτόταμαι
 τάλαν', οὐδ' ἰστάσα χοροῦς
 Ἀργεῖαις ἅμα νύμφαις
 εἰλικτὸν κρούσω πόδ' ἐμόν.
 δάκρυσι νυχεύ-
 ω, δακρύων δέ μοι μέλει
 δειλαίᾳ τὸ κατ' ἡμαρ.
 σκέψαι μου πιναρὰν κόμαν
 καὶ τρύχη τάδ' ἐμῶν πέπλων,
 εἰ πρέποντ' Ἀγαμέμνονος
 κούρᾳ ἔσται βασιλείᾳ
 τᾷ Τροίᾳ θ', ἃ' μού πατέρος
 μέμναται ποθ' ἀλοῦσα.

Dear friends, not for shimmering robes,
 does my heart take wing in delight
 I am too sad, I cannot stand
 in choral joy with the maidens
 or beat the tune with my whirling foot;
 rather with tears by night
 and tears by day shall I fill my soul
 shaking in grief and fear.
 Look! think! would my filthy locks
 and robe all torn into slavish rags
 do public honour to Agamemnon's
 daughter, the princess?
 honour to Troy which will never forget
 my conquering father?

(tr. Vermeule)

Electra refuses to participate because she is in mourning. Internally, she is consumed with feelings of grief that are incompatible with singing and dancing. Externally, her mourning is expressed in dirty hair and torn clothes that would prevent her making a display worthy of her status as Agamemnon's daughter. Electra's position confirms the opposition between expressions of mourning and ideal forms of choral performance. Her ongoing grief merges with her banishment to a lower social station to disqualify her as a choral performer, a condition on which she insists even when the chorus offers to lend her suitable clothes and gold ornaments. She makes the connection with her punitive marriage to a farmer even clearer when she tells Orestes how she is forced to carry water and make her own clothes and adds that she is ἀνέορτος ἱερῶν καὶ χορῶν τητωμένη ('missing the sacred festivals and deprived of choral dances', 310).

This deprivation is presumably cured by the outcome of the plot. At the end of the action, Electra confronts her status as a matricide by calling on the chorus to pity her: 'O weep for me. Where am I now? What dance (τίς ἐς χορόν) /—what wedding may I come to? What man will take me / as bride to his bed?' (1198–1200). The problem is solved by the appearance of the Dioscuroi, who enjoin Electra's marriage to Pylades, which gives her a husband of her own station and a right of return to choral festivity.

In these examples, the restoration of proper choral activity does not depend on an Athenian context in the overt way that it does in the *Eumenides*. There is instead a more subtle link to the idea that Athens and its institutions are instruments for restoring communal health, in this case through the institution of drama itself. The prominence of this scenario in the *Cyclops* underscores its connection to Dionysus and to the benefits he brings. The format of the tragic competition, with its repeated rehearsals of trouble, in the form of three tragedies, followed by high-spirited, joyous dancing in the form of a satyr play, is itself a version of the same scenario.

In a contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, Pat Easterling makes a suggestive comparison between the self-referential tragic chorus as described by Henrichs and the more prominent, and overtly theatrical and Dionysian, satyr chorus:

If we now go back to Henrichs' discussion of choral self-referentiality in tragedy we can see more clearly that there is a functional similarity between the choruses of tragedy and of satyr play in the references both make to their own performance. And the implication of this similarity is that the satyr play, by virtue of its placing at the end of the sequence of four plays, its typical plot pattern, and the identity of its chorus, represents the performers ultimately getting nearest to their 'true' cultic role of Dionysus-worshippers.²³

The Euripidean romances pull this Dionysian scenario back into an earlier stage of the dramatic sequence and extend it to choruses who are not satyrs, but human characters suffering from their involvement with the mortal protagonists of the tragic plot, or to those protagonists themselves. The same type of dramatic action serves to restore, not the mythic festivity of the satyr chorus, but participation by human characters in actual festivals in various Greek settings: in the *Helen*, the Spartan Hyacinthia; in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the festivals back in Argos that the chorus wistfully recalls; in *Electra*, the festivals that Electra will join in Phocis when she is restored to the social status in which she could have joined in the Argive *Heraia*. A Dionysian sequence of events, closely echoed in the programme of the festival in which

²³ Easterling (1997^b), 44.

tragedy is performed, is portrayed as fostering choral performances throughout the Greek world. Athenian drama assures, within the fictive world evoked during the tragic festival, the necessary conditions for a kind of performance in which real Athenian life was, relative to other cities, deficient: choral performances by women in honour of gods other than Dionysus.

In a gesture of cultural self-assertion, Athens appropriates through its unique form of tragedy-plus-satyr drama the choral festivity of other cities, laying claim to the foreign poetic traditions out of which tragedy developed. We do not know exactly when and how the format of the dramatic festival was established, but the ancient tradition that satyr drama was added to the tragic competitions to make up for something missing²⁴ points to the perceived importance of this combination of dramatic genres. The reinstated festivities envisioned in these plays, like the choral fantasies found in the *Hecuba* and the *Trojan Women*, also allude to the role of tragedy as a cultural export, capable of being performed in many cities.²⁵ Tragedy's capacity to depict the restoration of traditional performances in other cities echoes and reinforces one of the city's proudest achievements, its creation of a new art form that other cities were eager to adopt.²⁶

4. LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS

Outcomes such as the satyr chorus's reunion with Dionysus or Helen's return to the Spartan Hyacinthia restore the chorus's essential structure, which combines an undifferentiated group with one or more leaders, in that way naturally lending itself to the exploration of political relationships. The presence of leaders is as definitive of the chorus as the unified actions of the group. As Steven Lonsdale puts it, 'the essential action of a *choros* is that of being led'.²⁷ Thus the chorus can be identified as 'a formal expression of the simultaneity of hierarchy and egalitarianism in the *polis*'.²⁸ A choral performance enacts a well-functioning, mutually beneficial, collaboration between chorus leaders and chorus members, with the right mixture of hierarchy and equality.

The question of the proper relationship between leaders and led is fundamental for any political regime, although it had a particular resonance in the Athenian democracy, where strong, often aristocratic leaders coincided with

²⁴ Seaford (1984), 11–12. ²⁵ Visvardi (this volume); Easterling (1994).

²⁶ On tragedy itself as an advertisement for Athens and its institutions, see Taplin (1999).

²⁷ Lonsdale (1993), 230. On the importance and distinction of the chorus leader, see Dem. 21.60; Arist. *Pol.* 1277^a11–12, where differentiation within the chorus serves as an analogy for differentiation among citizens.

²⁸ Nagy (1990), 377.

an antipathy to tyranny and a stress on the participation of all citizens. The relations of leaders and followers are equally a concern in the pre-*polis* world of early epic, which provides the setting of most tragic plots. Homer's heroes are surrounded and supported by groups of undifferentiated and more ordinary men, such as Achilles' Myrmidons or the larger Achaean army or Odysseus' companions. As Johannes Haubold's study of the Homeric people shows, the leaders of epic assert themselves at the expense of those groups, and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* both tell surprisingly painful stories of how both Achilles and Odysseus bring profound suffering and wholesale destruction to the men who follow them.²⁹ Achilles is perhaps the more purposeful in seeking harm to his own allies, but the *Odyssey* is haunted from its beginning by the problem of Odysseus' companions and his failure to secure their homecoming.

Tragedy inherits the troubled issue of leaders and groups from epic and recasts it in a new form in which individual actors are juxtaposed with the undifferentiated group represented by the chorus. This transposition is noted in a comment in a work attributed to Aristotle: 'among the ancients only the leaders were heroes, the army were ordinary humans: the latter form the chorus' ([Arist.] *Pr.* 922^b17–19). Athenian choral drama was constituted, both institutionally and formally, through the separation of the chorus leader from the chorus;³⁰ as a result, the homogeneity of the chorus was reaffirmed while the leader, and with him the problems caused by individual distinction and self-assertion, took on even greater prominence. Institutionally, the chorus leader was converted into the *chorēgos*, in the form of a rich citizen who funded choral performances; as Wilson notes in his chapter in this volume, this development was a 'two-way move' that might have democratized the chorus by relieving it of an overbearing individual, but also created a new opportunity for elite competitive display. Formally, tragic drama was apparently created through the conversion of choral leaders into actors, who impersonated prominent figures, often with powerful, assertive personalities (Arist. *Poet.* 1449^a9–19). The result was a form inherently suited to representing the issue of mass–elite relations. As Simon Goldhill puts it, 'the interplay between collective and individual, mirrored in the relation of chorus and hero on stage, is a central dynamic of democratic power in action'.³¹

As has already been noted, the tragic chorus mirrors the democratic collective only obliquely, because its dramatic role is usually not that of a

²⁹ Haubold (2000).

³⁰ The tragic chorus did have a leader in the figure usually labelled the *coryphaeus*, but, as Foley (2003: 11) notes, he remained 'anonymous and in principle undifferentiated from the tragic collective' in contrast to the leaders of archaic aristocratic choruses in other cities, or of the choruses of satyr plays.

³¹ Goldhill (2000), 45.

group of citizens. Even choruses of citizens represent only a subgroup of the entire *dēmos*, being restricted to a certain age or locality, a feature they share with choruses in aristocratic non-Athenian contexts.³² Many of these are choruses of old men, who are fully enfranchised, often influential members of the political community, but who do not represent the people as a whole and, by virtue of their age, mostly stand outside the action.³³ In her survey of the roles taken by tragic choruses, Helene Foley observes that choruses of men of military age are rare and speculates that this may reflect a reluctance to address the thorny problem of leaders and led head on.³⁴ But the constant presence of the chorus does affirm the importance of groups, including the group of performers beneath the costumes. And if the chorus's painful implication in the sufferings of the main characters is intrinsic to tragedy, so too is their survival at the end of the play.³⁵

The survival of the tragic chorus foregrounds the value and persistence of the community in a way that Homeric narrative, with its sharper focus on individual heroes, does not. Some of the most influential discussions of tragic politics have taken account of the chorus's survival as a significant factor, although with varying conclusions about the meaning of tragic scenarios in which the main characters undergo severe and destructive traumas while the chorus looks on with sympathy but comes out unscathed at the end. For Richard Seaford, the egalitarian political community represented by the chorus can only exist through the destruction of self-seeking aristocrats, which is the necessary and desired outcome of the tragic plot, even if it occasions tremendous grief.³⁶ For Mark Griffith (1995), the community of ordinary people is more positively dependent on the actions of aristocratic leaders, whom they regard with admiration and gratitude but are happy not to emulate; the sufferings undergone by the main characters are the risks they run for the sake of the community rather than themselves the necessary condition of the community's survival. Taken together, these two perspectives capture the challenging ambiguity of exceptional individuals—whether in the world of Homer, or of tragedy, or of real-life fifth-century Athens. In their relentless self-assertion, such figures bring disproportionate benefits to their community and inflict disproportionate damage; they need to be cultivated and to be expelled.

³² Carter (2010).

³³ For the important point that choruses of elders cannot be considered socially marginal, even if they are on the sidelines of the action, see Carter (2010); Dhuga (2005).

³⁴ Foley (2003), 11–12.

³⁵ On Sophoclean choruses as representing various groups (including civic communities, spectators, and humanity in general) in their relations with their leaders and their capacity for survival, see Budelmann (2000), 195–272.

³⁶ Seaford (1994), esp. 344–6.

In a number of plays, the displacement and suffering of the tragic chorus serves as a sign of disturbed, unhealthy relations between a leader and his followers. One example is the chorus of Aeschylus' *Persians*, which represents a group of Persian elders. These men are to an extent marginalized by their age: they have been left behind by Xerxes' expedition. Occupying the scene of the drama, they enact a story of longing for the absent army that unfolds in tandem with the off-stage story of the army's defeat.³⁷ But they are also prominent figures, who identify themselves from the outset as trusted guardians of the royal palace as well as faithful supporters of the departed army (Aesch. *Pers.* 1–4). As Persians, they are the subjects of a despot rather than citizens and free members of a *polis*. But if thriving, victorious Athens functions throughout the play as a spatial and cultural foil for defeated Persia, Persian history provides another foil in the reign of Darius, to which the chorus looks back with nostalgia.

This nostalgia is voiced at the beginning of the third stasimon (852–63):

ὦ πόποι ἦ μεγάλας ἀγαθὰς τε πο-
 λισσονόμου βιοτᾶς ἐπεκύρσαμεν,
 εὖθ' ὁ γηραιὸς
 πανταρκῆς ἀκάκας
 ἄμαχος βασιλεὺς
 ἰσόθεος Δαρείος ἄρχε χώρας.
 πρῶτα μὲν εὐδοκίμους στρατιᾶς ἀπε-
 φαινόμεθ', ἡδὲ νομίσματα πύργῳ
 πάντ' ἐπηύθυνε,
 νόστοι δ' ἐκ πολέμων
 ἀπόνους ἀπαθείς
 <ἀνέρας> εὖ πράσσοντας ἄγον οἴκους.

O *popoi*, what a great and excellent
 life of civic order was ours,
 when the old
 all-sufficing undamaging invincible
 godlike King Dareios ruled the land!
 First we proved ourselves glorious on military campaigns,
 and then a system of laws, steadfast as towers,
 regulated everything (?)
 Our men returned home again from wars.
 successfully, uninjured and
 unharmed.

(tr. Hall)

³⁷ Hopman (2009).

Despite the textual problems in this passage, it is clear that a connection is made between a choral identity that is at once peripheral to the action and consigned to grief, and a disordered relationship between leader and led. In the days of Darius, the Persians enjoyed a *πολισσονόμου βιοτᾶς*, which could mean that they ruled over many subject cities, but more likely means that their state was well ordered internally; in either case, this better set of conditions was linked to *νομίσματα* ('laws') and to *nostos* for all, that return home for all the troops that Xerxes (like Odysseus in the *Odyssey*) spectacularly fails to provide.

The unfolding of events over time, in particular the transfer of power from Darius to Xerxes, has served to constitute this group as a distinctively tragic chorus in several ways: it has involved them in disastrous misfortune and made them perpetual mourners; it has deprived them of a relationship with a leader that mimics the good order represented by non-tragic choral experience; and it has made them marginal by making them old. We are reminded of this last point when the ghost of Darius appears shortly before this and greets them both as *ἡλικές θ' ἡβης ἐμῆς* ('contemporaries of my youth') and as *Πέρσαι γεραιοί* ('aged Persians', 681–2). Darius was not only a more capable, salvific, and restrained leader for them; he also resembled them more closely, so that the distinction between leader and followers was less excessively stark.³⁸

This tight link between age and tragic misfortune reinforces the point that has already emerged in relation to choruses of captive aristocrats, namely that the marginality of the tragic chorus is not a means of achieving sociological breadth, but rather of representing the chorus as displaced by the circumstances of the plot from their ideal identity. In optimistic tragic scenarios, choral enslavement is reversible, as in the *Iphigenia in Tauris* and so, with the help of Dionysus, is old age. This can be seen in the quasi-comic episode in Euripides' *Bacchae* in which Cadmus and Teiresias eagerly join the dance (Eur. *Bacch.* 170–214).³⁹ In another optimistic scenario, the ideal *polis* outlined in the *Laws*, something similar occurs: there choral activity is expanded beyond what is typical in existing cities to include even the old; in fact, the Athenian suggests giving men ample amounts of wine only after they turn 40, so that wine can rejuvenate these older men and make them more willing to take part

³⁸ On choruses as often made up of contemporaries, see Calame (2001), 26–30.

³⁹ William Slater (2000: 117–21) draws attention to the traditional idea that when old men dance, all is well; this is expressed in various popular maxims and may lie behind both the *Bacchae* scene and the famous question of the chorus of Sophocles' *OT*, 'Why Should I Dance?'; in addition, Menander's *Dyscolus* ends with the old man Cnemon being forced to *choreuein* (Men. *Dys.* 957).

at least in singing (Pl. *Laws*. 666a2ff.). This proposal is preceded by an interesting account of current reality (657d1–8):

ἀρ' οὖν οὐχ ἡμῶν οἱ μὲν νέοι αὐτοὶ χορεύειν ἔτοιμοι, τὸ δὲ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ἡμῶν ἐκείνους αὖ θεωροῦντες διάγειν ἡγούμεθα πρεπόντως, χαίροντες τῇ ἐκείνων παιδιᾷ τε καὶ ἑορτάσει, ἐπειδὴ τὸ παρ' ἡμῖν ἡμᾶς ἐλαφρόν ἐκλείπει νῦν, ὃ ποθοῦντες καὶ ἀσπαζόμενοι τίθεμεν οὕτως ἀγῶνας τοῖς δυναμένοις ἡμᾶς ὅτι μάλιστ' εἰς τὴν νεότητα μνήμη ἐπεγείρειν.

Now while our young men are fitted for actually dancing themselves, we elders regard ourselves as suitably employed in looking on at them and enjoying their sport and merry-making, now that our former nimbleness is leaving us; and it is our yearning regret for this that causes us to propose such contests for those who can best arouse in us through recollection, the dormant emotions of youth. (tr. Bury⁴⁰)

Older men prescribe choral contests for younger men out of a longing to relieve their own participation in choruses: they feel a nostalgia for being in a chorus like the nostalgia that the *Persians'* chorus feels for being the followers of an appropriate leader.

The trauma of destructive leadership causes the *Persians'* chorus suffering that is as irremediable as old age and inspires perpetual grief. When they confront their failed leader on stage, however, the chorus does achieve some relief through their joint lamentation, which brings the play to a satisfying, if mournful close. As Marianne Hopman has argued, in that scene of confrontation, the Persian elders also become more like Athenians. Their hostility to Xerxes in itself connects them to the Athenians, and they treat him as citizens of the democratic *polis* treat their leaders, speaking frankly and holding him accountable for his actions. As the end of the play approaches, the setting of the play becomes more like the place in which it is being performed, and the chorus moves subtly towards the identity that lies underneath their exotic costumes.⁴¹

A similar trajectory can be observed in Sophocles' *Ajax*, where the chorus is already 'closer than most tragic choruses to the Athenian *dēmos* in terms of identity'.⁴² Portraying a group of Salaminian sailors who have followed Ajax to Troy, the chorus represents one version of the groups of men who surround heroes in the Homeric epics while also evoking both the contemporary Athenian navy and one of the Cleisthenic tribes, which was named after Ajax. Much of their self-description highlights the disadvantages of having followed Ajax to Troy. Simply being away from home at war means being cut off from festivity. They lay this out explicitly in an ode in which they lament

⁴⁰ Reprinted from Plato, *Laws* books 1–6, Loeb Classical Library vol. 187, translated by R. G. Bury, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, © 1925, by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Loeb Classical Library ® is a registered trademark of the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

⁴¹ Hopman (2009).

⁴² Hesk (2003), 49.

their exile from the pleasures of peacetime civic life, including song and dance, in this case at the symposium (Soph. *Aj.* 1193–1206).

The sailors also suffer through their extreme dependence on Ajax. Early in the play, they hear rumours of Ajax's downfall, the episode of madness in which he has attempted to kill the leaders of the army, and they reveal how much they are invested in his situation (136–40):

σέ μὲν εὖ πράσσοντ' ἐπιχαίρω.
σέ δ' ὅταν πληγὴ Διὸς ἢ ζαμενῆς
λόγος ἐκ Δαναῶν κακόθρους ἐπιβῇ,
μέγαν ὄκνον ἔχω καὶ πεφόβημαι
πτηνῆς ὡς ὄμμα πελείας.

When you do well I rejoice,
but when Zeus' blow or the furious
evil-speaking word of the Greeks strikes you,
I shrink back and cower
like the eye of a fluttering dove.

And they go on to outline a symbiosis of leader and led that implicates them, for all their humility, in Ajax's disaster (157–61):

πρὸς γὰρ τὸν ἔχονθ' ὁ φθόνος ἔρπει.
καίτοι σμικροὶ μεγάλων χωρὶς
σφαλερὸν πύργου ῥῦμα πέλονται·
μετὰ γὰρ μεγάλων βαιὸς ἄριστ' ἂν
καὶ μέγας ὀρθοῖθ' ὑπὸ μικροτέρων.

Envy goes after those who have much.
But the little men without the great
Are a shaky prop for a tower.
Better for the weak to rely on the great
And the great to be shored up by the weaker.

The idea that the chorus needs Ajax in order to flourish, and so to manifest their choral identity, surfaces in a characteristic Sophoclean scene of misguided revelry. When they believe that Ajax will not kill himself, they feel inspired to sing and dance: νῦν γὰρ ἐμοὶ μέλει χορεῦσαι (701). When they realize that they have been deceived, they recognize their own disaster. As they approach his dead body, their thoughts fly to their lost homecoming: ὦμοι ἐμῶν νόστων (900). Ajax is a harder figure to evaluate than Xerxes in the *Persians*, but his pursuit of his own agenda has the same bleak consequence for his men.

And yet, as the aftermath of Ajax's death unfolds, the chorus are not reduced to cowering doves. They survive and play a part in the debate over the fate of Ajax's body. With this debate, the action of the play comes to

resemble more closely the political life of a *polis* like Athens than it does in the first half, where the atmosphere is that of the epic battle camp. The debate itself is far from ideal, and can even be taken to represent the debasement of political discourse in the classical *polis*, but it does nonetheless achieve a satisfying result. After both Menelaus and Agamemnon have sparred verbally with Teucer, Odysseus steps in and persuades the leaders to allow Ajax a proper burial.

The chorus plays a quiet, subordinate but significant role in this process.⁴³ They are instrumental in turning what starts out as a shouting match into something that resembles a debate. Menelaus starts out with a speech in which he denounces Ajax's insubordination, includes a few comments on the general necessity of obedience, and declares that now it is his, Menelaus', turn to assert himself ('now I'm the one who thinks big'). The chorus responds with a pair of lines that may seem bland, but actually have the important effect of redefining Menelaus' speech, recasting it as a lofty piece of general advice after which personally motivated violence would be inappropriate (1091–2):

Μενέλαε, μὴ γνώμας ὑποστήσας σοφὰς
εἰτ' αὐτὸς ἐν θανούσιν ὕβριστ' ἔγγη.

Menelaus, now that you've established wise principles,
don't then yourself commit outrage against the dead.

And Teucer responds to this by addressing his speech to the chorus, confirming the role they have adopted as the audience of the debate (1093–6):

οὐκ ἄν ποτ', ἄνδρες, ἄνδρα θαυμάσαιμ' ἔτι,
ὅς μὴδὲν ὦν γοναίσιν εἰθ' ἁμαρτάνει,
ὅθ' οἱ δοκοῦντες εὐγενεῖς πεφυκέναι
τοιαῦθ' ἁμαρτάνουσιν ἐν λόγοις ἔπη.

Men, I will never again be amazed
to see a man of humble birth go wrong
when those who claim the noblest birth of all
utter such wrongful speech as you've just heard.

Teucer's speech is no less aggressive and partisan than Menelaus', but he and the chorus have together turned the occasion into a debate in which the judgement of an audience is a significant factor. After Agamemnon has also

⁴³ This discussion is indebted to the analyses of Hawthorne (2009), who also points out a similar pattern in other plays of Sophocles with citizen or citizen-like choruses, and Barker (2004).

had a round of hostile words with Teucer, the chorus welcomes Odysseus as a figure who might bring about a resolution.

Here the chorus acts out the role of ordinary citizens, listening to and evaluating the arguments of more prominent figures. With the towering Ajax out of the picture, they shed their condition of extreme dependence and take on a more autonomous role. They are still an anonymous group, but there is greater parity between them and the leaders to whom they respond and themselves give advice. They perform an important civic function, as an audience which turns a private quarrel into a public event. As the plot of the *Ajax* moves towards a positive resolution of the question of Ajax's burial, the chorus fulfils a more satisfying model of how an anonymous group functions within a community. As in the *Persians*, the play ends with a form of choral self-referentiality, but one in which reference is made, not to the chorus's temporary role as a chorus, but to their everyday identity as Athenian citizens. These final episodes reaffirm, not the festivity of the performance, but the political order that the festive performance mimics and that is its precondition.⁴⁴

5. CONCLUSION

The chorus's impersonation of a character in a myth is a defining feature of tragedy and an eloquent means of conveying the wrenching, disorienting nature of tragic experience. The struggles of individuals are extended and amplified as the choral group is pulled out of the here-and-now of the dramatic performance and ensnared in the tragic plot, where it becomes the protagonists' fellow sufferers, or victims, or anguished witnesses. In that it remains recognizably a performing chorus, the tragic chorus straddles the two realms of tragic myth and fifth-century dramatic festival. But those realms are sharply opposed, as can be seen in the tension between the patriotic ceremonies that surrounded tragic performances and the events dramatized in the plays themselves, to which Simon Goldhill (1987/1990) has drawn attention, or in the paradoxical role of the chorus discussed in this chapter.

⁴⁴ Since this outcome follows from Ajax's death, the *Ajax* can be seen as supporting Richard Seaford's (1994) argument that tragedy expresses its democratic affiliation by depicting the destruction of aristocrats, which is beneficial to democracy. In other tragedies, however, choruses interacting with living aristocratic or monarchical leaders also present positive images of political order: for example, the chorus of the *Persians* recalling the reign of Darius, the chorus of the *Oedipus at Colonus* ceding the question of Oedipus' presence in Athens to Theseus (Soph. OC 294–5), the chorus of the *Rhesus* acting as confident and energetic advisers to Hector.

Choruses manifest that opposition when the group they represent is threatened or when their identity as choruses is compromised, whether because they cannot imagine dancing, or because their dancing is out of place, or because dancing in a chorus is something they can only remember from a lost past, or imagine in a longed-for future.

Goldhill finds a political meaning in the gap between tragic myths and the ceremonial occasion of their performance, arguing that the fifth-century Athenian democracy had a positive stake in staging plots that called its founding assumptions into question. This discussion has identified a complementary political meaning in the role of the chorus in bridging that gap: an affirmation of Athenian achievement that is inherent in tragedy's status as an impressive form of choral performance and reinforced by plots that bring about the chorus's release from their imprisonment in tragic experience, whether explicitly, as in the *Eumenides* or the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, or implicitly, as in the *Persians* or the *Ajax*. This form of resolution aligns the tragic plot with the more self-referential and affirmative genres of comedy and satyr play, and it is brought about, as we have seen, through the practices and institutions of the *polis*, such as the court of the Areopagus, or forms of political participation characterized by criticism and debate, or the dramatic festival itself. Those institutions depended on workable relationships between outstanding leaders and larger groups, and negotiating such relationships was a vital, but by no means exclusive, concern of the Athenian democracy. By rehearsing scenarios that associated Athenian institutions with the restoration of endangered choral performance, Athens advertised to itself and to the wider Greek world its own success in creating the healthy political order that the chorus itself symbolized. Among the most compelling and widely broadcast expressions of that success was the dramatic festival itself, with its innovative presentation of the chorus as a participant in the dramatic action and its built-in movement from grief and negated music to light-hearted joy and festivity.